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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/21/2017

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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OCTOBER 6

REF: ISLAMABAD 4064

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: On September 20, Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP) set the presidential election for October 6.

This confirms that Musharraf will seek re-election, in uniform, before the current assemblies. Opposition parties issued the predictable objections, but the move demonstrated Musharraf's growing confidence that the Supreme Court will rule in his favor. The Court will resume hearings Monday on the current bundle of cases challenging Musharraf's eligibility to seek re-election. Meanwhile, time is running out for a pre-election "deal" between Bhutto and Musharraf. End summary.

12. (C) Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP) announced September 20 that Pakistan's presidential election will take place October 6. Reftel outlines a process where the Election Commission oversees voting by an electoral college composed of National and Provincial Assemblies. The Commissioner will rule by September 29 on the eligibility of the candidates. To date, only one possible opponent, a lone physician, has announced his intention to challenge Musharraf.

13. (C) Opposition parties and civil society groups renewed their objections and again called upon the Supreme Court to disqualify Musharraf. Some see Musharraf's announcement that he will remove his uniform after the election as more of a threat to guarantee his re-election than as a welcome opportunity to move towards civilian rule.

14. (C) Opposition groups also renewed their threats to walk out of the National and Provincial Assemblies. As noted in reftel, Musharraf has the votes to win the required simple majority; the question now is the extent an opposition walkout would weaken his credibility. The opposition has been unable to unite on this issue so far; their ability to embarrass Musharraf over the vote will depend on whether the Pakistan People's Party joins them.

15. (C) The Supreme Court denied a petition by Tehrik-e-Insaf Chairman Imran Khan challenging the ECP's right to alter the rules governing eligibility of candidates.

On Monday, the Court will resume hearing arguments in the bundled cases challenging Musharraf's right to seek re-election in uniform. We expect a decision next week. Meanwhile, police with riot shields grossly outnumbered today's fifty MMA religious block protesters in front of the Supreme Court.

16. (C) Comment: Musharraf's decision to move forward on setting a date for presidential elections even before the Supreme Court rules on his cases demonstrates his growing confidence in a positive verdict. We expect to find out next week whether that confidence is misplaced. Meanwhile, time is running out for a pre-election "deal" between Bhutto and Musharraf.
PATTERSON